How School Boards Work

The Role of the Board of Education in the Community

IASB Illinois Association of School Boards
Lighting the Way to Excellence in School Governance

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The school board: What it is. What it does.

The board of education, also called the school board, is a unit of local government that establishes direction, goals, and priorities for a school district and determines policy, budget, leadership, and administration.

The local school board grew out of the town meeting, dating back to the original 13 Colonies. Times have changed, but the function of school boards today remains the same: to provide local citizen control over public education, representing the community and its aspirations for its local schools.

Today, school board members represent the interests of nearly two million Illinois public school children.

The Illinois Constitution grants boards of education latitude in governing their school districts, subject to state laws and regulations. The local school board is required to adopt and enforce all policies necessary for the management and governance of the public schools of the district. Through its written policies, the board directs and empowers the superintendent to function as chief executive officer in managing day-to-day district operations.

The board studies the needs of students and the community and bases its decisions on those needs. The superintendent carries out those decisions. The following chart distinguishes board work from staff work:

Board	Superintendent/ District Staff
Governance	Management
Core Values and Beliefs	Objectives
Mission, Vision, and Goals	Action plans
Policies	Procedures
Action: Vote	Action: Recommend and Implement
Monitoring Progress	Evidence of Compliance

Board meetings

Because a school board is an elected governmental body, it can take action only by majority vote at a public meeting. An individual board member has no authority other than the right to cast a vote at such a meeting. The purpose of a school board meeting is to transact the legal business of the school district through discussion and voting among the members.

While school board meetings are held in public, they are not meetings of the public. This means that members of the public are welcome to attend to listen and observe, but they are not a part of the board discussion. Board policy establishes the public comment portion of a meeting, during which individuals may address the board, but rarely does a board engage in dialogue with the public during a school board meeting.

Outside of regularly convened meetings, effective boards engage in an ongoing two-way conversation through the use of public forums, surveys, citizens committees, and other engagement tools to determine the community's aspirations for its schools and students.

Legal authority and regulation of public education

The legal authority that Illinois school boards operate under comes from the Illinois State Constitution. The laws governing schools are found in the Illinois Compiled Statutes. Many are contained in Chapter 105, which is commonly called "The School Code," but there are many other chapters that affect or regulate schools, both directly and indirectly.

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) was created by the Illinois Constitution to "establish goals, determine policies, provide for planning and evaluating education programs and recommend financing" for the public schools of Illinois. The Board appoints a chief state educational officer, known as the State Superintendent of Schools, who is in charge of the operations of the state's department of education. ISBE is charged with developing regulations designed to implement those statutes enacted by the Illinois General Assembly that affect school districts. This collection of regulations is known as Chapter 23 of the Illinois Administrative Code.

Regional Offices of Education (ROEs) are administered by Regional Superintendents of Schools elected by popular vote. Regional Boards of School Trustees are elected individuals, chosen from among the citizens of the region. Duties are assigned to the ROEs by statute.

The U.S. Constitution does not mention education, and as such public education is the responsibility of the state. However, since the 1960s the federal government has had an increased role in the regulation of schools by imposing requirements upon the states. Federal laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the Gun-Free Schools Act, and the Family Education Rights Privacy Act impact schools.

Schools are also bound by case law, rulings of various courts as they interpret laws to determine applicability in a particular instance, constitutionality, and fairness.

IASB provides training and resources

Although not a part of state government, the Illinois Association of School Boards (IASB) is organized by member school boards as a private not-for-profit corporation under authority granted by Article 23 of The Illinois School Code. IASB is not a regulatory or oversight organization for local school boards. Rather, the Illinois Association of School Boards is a voluntary organization of local boards of education dedicated to strengthening the public schools through local citizen control.

The vision of the Illinois Association of School Boards is excellence in local school board governance supporting quality public education.

The mission of the Illinois Association of School Boards is to *Light the Way* for its members by developing their competence and confidence through a robust toolkit designed to build excellence in local school board governance, including

- Premier training experiences;
- Networking opportunities for mutual support;
- Valuable benefits, pooled services, information, and expertise;
- Advocacy on behalf of public education; and
- A platform for a strong collective voice on common interests and concerns.

Effective school boards

School board practices vary from place to place. The degree of formality required in conducting meetings, for example, may depend on whether the board meets before a large audience, a small one, or no audience at all. A good school board

- Knows the difference between governance (which is its job) and management (which is the administration's job).
- Makes every effort to operate openly by encouraging public attendance at its meetings and keeping constituents informed of the district's progress.
- Enacts policies after study and consultation with all persons or groups affected.
- Attempts to reach decisions that all members can support.
- Maintains efficient procedures to conduct business.
- Monitors district goals using data.
- Works to provide quality education opportunities for all students of the district.

A Code of Conduct for Members of School Boards, adopted by the IASB Board of Directors, espouses high ethical standards for boards of education and individual board members. IASB also developed six principles that describe the work of school boards and are the cornerstone of the Association's beliefs about the governance process.

1. The board clarifies the district purpose.
2. The board connects with the community.
3. The board employs a superintendent.
4. The board delegates authority.
5. The board monitors performance.
6. The board takes responsibility for itself.

A good school board member

Board members come from all walks of life. The ability to function as one member of a seven-member governing board is not determined by any demographic or social standing. Effective school board members, however, are characterized by the following:

- The abilities to work as a member of a team with an open mind and to engage in give-and-take to arrive at a group consensus.
- The willingness to spend the time required to become informed and do the homework needed to take part in effective school board meetings.
- The desire to serve children and the community and a strong belief in the values of public schools and educational success.

- The recognition that the school district is a large operation and that the board is responsible for seeing that the district is run by highly skilled professionals.

Addressing concerns

Sometimes members of the community contact a school board member with concerns, suggestions, and questions. This may be appropriate when discussing district-wide policy. Often, however, the matter is outside of the individual board member's role and authority and must be referred to the superintendent or other staff. For a school concern, the best place to begin is with those directly involved: The teacher for a student-related or classroom concern for example, or the principal regarding a school regulation or practice. If the first point of contact is unclear, contact the district office for guidance on the appropriate chain of command.

Certain concerns may need forwarded to the attention of the superintendent, especially when matters involve state laws or district-wide policies.

If the concern is important enough to be brought before a public meeting of the full board, request the superintendent place it on the agenda for the next board meeting. Boards must allow time at meetings for public input. Those wishing to speak should find out in advance about time limits or other locally-established rules. Again, rarely does a board engage in dialogue with the public during a school board meeting. A good board of education listens to public input.

School board members are elected or legally appointed officials not subject to removal or recall by the public. In Illinois, only a regional superintendent of schools has the authority to remove a school board member for willful failure to perform official duties, according to the School Code (105 ILCS 5/3-15.5). This is rare. There is no provision for recall or removal by direct public action during a board member's term. The public's course of action is the school board election.

Help build good school boards, and good schools

School boards have a responsibility to make the most effective, efficient use of school resources. You can help ensure local decisions about education programs align with your community's needs by

- Electing capable and well-motivated people to your school board, supporting them, and working to ensure that they represent the entire community.
- Establishing a constructive relationship with your child's teacher and school administration and staying informed of what is going on in the school and in the district.
- Seeking ways to resolve school problems through discussion and consensus and to avoid the conflicts that disrupt the team effort that is essential for good education.
- As a parent, working for the widest possible participation in your school's parent organization and assisting and supporting the school board and school administration in understanding what parents think on major issues.
- Consider, should the opportunity present itself to you, running for a seat on your local board of education.

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